

News Release



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State Historic Park in Watts

Report Finds Watts Towers Structurally Sound

LOS ANGELES – An examination of the Watts Towers has determined that they are structurally sound, and offered a number of detailed recommendations for preserving the Towers and extending their life, State Parks and Los Angeles City officials announced today.

California State Parks contracted with a consulting team, consisting of a structural engineer and a materials scientist, to perform a detailed examination of the unique hand-made towers in the Watts area of Los Angeles.

"Los Angeles takes great pride in the Watts Towers, one of only four National Landmarks in the city," said Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn. "Now that we know that the Towers are structurally sound, we need to focus on preserving them so that generations of visitors, from Los Angeles and throughout the world, can enjoy and admire this treasure for years to come."

Ted Jackson, Southern Division Chief for California State Parks, said, "The consultants have identified the primary issues related to the Watts Towers, and that will be extremely helpful in determining how best to care for them."

The Watts Towers of Simon Rodia State Historic Park is a unit of the State Park System and managed by the City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department.

"We are pleased to have California State Parks as an active partner in the care of this important cultural site," said Margie Reese, General Manager of the City's Cultural Affairs Department. "The independent reports spotlight areas beyond the actual conservation work where new funding is needed. In this time of austere government budgets, I look forward to working with the State in identifying and securing monies to implement these recommendations."

The park is named for Simon Rodia, an Italian immigrant who worked on the towers from 1921 until 1955, creating the sculptures as a tribute to his adopted country. Rodia used simple hand tools and discarded materials to build the 17 separate sculptures, two of which rise to a height of nearly 100 feet. The sculptures were constructed from steel pipes and rods, wrapped with wire mesh, coated with mortar, and embedded with the pieces of porcelain, tile and glass.

The Watts Towers are one of only nine works of folk art listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and one of only four U.S. National Historic Landmarks in the city of Los Angeles.

The idea of an independent inspection of the Watts Towers grew from a series of meetings California State Parks convened with the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department, the Getty Conservation Institute and the non-profit Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts, with the goal of identifying major priorities and needs for the Watts Towers. The examination was commissioned to determine the current condition of the Watts Towers, and seek recommendations for future maintenance.

Performing the examination were structural engineer John Kariotis and materials scientist Frank Preusser.

Kariotis reviewed the history of structural repairs to the central tower, using both written records and a visual inspection, to determine the structural integrity of the Towers as a whole. His report included the results of the structural assessment, a risk assessment of the historic fabric of the central tower and recommendations for possible modifications of restoration procedures and of current structural repair procedures.

Preusser reviewed the existing maintenance policies for the structures, inspection reports, maintenance records and correspondence, as well as a visual inspection of the Towers to develop recommendations for improvements to the inspection procedures, site maintenance, documentation and visitor control.

According to the reports, the Towers do not present an imminent danger of collapse and do not present a risk to the public. In addition, consultant Preusser concluded that "the basic treatment and maintenance program is quite solid but can use review and improvements." The State and the City recognize, as Simon Rodia did, that the Towers, because of their ad hoc construction, structural diversity and variation in materials, require constant repair and maintenance.

The reports' recommendations included:

- Updating the Conservation Handbook to include the current approved materials and methods for conservation.
- Reviewing and revising the comprehensive inspection and monitoring program.
- Developing a plan for the long-term maintenance of the Towers.
- Revising the current documentation process, including updating the computer database system.
- Improving the visitor experience through removal of the work area from the State Historic Park site and better signage.

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